



SAXO GRAMMATICUS

HIEROCRATICAL CONCEPTIONS AND DANISH HEGEMONY IN THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY

by

ANDRÉ MUCENIECKS



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FOREWORD

AS ALREADY POINTED out by many people, the *Gesta Danorum*, written by the Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus, has been the subject of an immense amount of scholarly investigation for several centuries. Despite this, new aspects can still be added to the edifice of the work and its mythical as well as historical contents. The present book, unusual in that it has been written in Brazil yet deals with Northern Europe in the Middle Ages, contributes to both of the aforementioned aspects of Saxo's work with the help of clearly-defined points of departure and questions at issue.

The book can be said to consist of two main parts, even if this is not explicitly stated. The first four chapters form a broad contextualizing background for chapters 5 and 6, in which the author's own, new contributions to research on Saxo are primarily found. Even if the contextualizing parts are mostly informative, they contain valuable and interesting observations made by the author that go beyond merely reproducing what is already known. For instance, by using mainly sources other than Saxo's own work to describe the Northern German and Danish expansion in the Baltics from a chronological perspective, the author brings the contents of the *Gesta* into full relief. Thus, these parts of the book are more than a mere study of Saxo's work as an historical narrative. Placed in this broader perspective, it is possible to understand the author's comprehensive and stimulating treatment of Saxo, his sources of inspiration, his text, and its composition. The author undertakes interesting comparisons with the different narratives contained in Icelandic historical texts and their writers' respective knowledge of the Baltics. It appears that Saxo had better knowledge than might be expected, but also that he had another aim and direction concerning his narrative, viz. to defend Danish hegemony in the Baltic area as seen in the light of the Northern Crusades.

Undeniably, the four so-called cardinal virtues, *fortitudo*, *iustitia*, *prudentia*, and *temperantia*, played an important role in medieval theology and moral philosophy. However, they are not easily translated into modern English. Despite this fact, they can open up a better understanding of the composition of Saxo's work, and for this reason they have been used in earlier research as a sort of structuralizing instrument that can be put onto the descriptions in the *Gesta Danorum*, or at least parts of them. The observation that Saxo actually made use of them has also served as an opposition to the overly one-sided view of him as being interested only in aristocratic values, military aspects of history, and warfare. In the first main chapter, the author carries out a distinct and fundamental analysis of Saxo's terminological use of the mentioned virtues by setting them within a long historical perspective going back to Antiquity. Already the fact that it is difficult to

translate them shows that it is an interesting and important task to analyze them within the framework of Saxo's usage—a fact that inspired the author to undertake a thorough and original investigation, chiseling out the terms' multidimensional meaning and indicating to which figures in Saxo's narrative in books I–IV the individual cardinal virtues apply. Thus, the investigation delivers new insights in addition to what is known from earlier research.

In the second major part of the study, the author starts from his own theoretical point of departure—i.e., the counsellors and their role as the leading personalities in Danish society. He relates this concept primarily to the complex relationship between King Valemur I and Archbishop Absalon, as Saxo introduces the counsellor as a guide for the king. The author looks to Western Europe, Scandinavia, and Iceland for models and sources of inspiration, which Saxo may have had for this theme and integrates them into his comprehensive analysis. The section consists primarily of an exposition of Saxo's narrative technique with regard to the mentioned theme, but the cardinal virtues are treated in a convincing way. This is true, especially, for books I–IX; but it is also true for the historical parts of the *Gesta Danorum* concerning the three first archbishops of Lund. Next, the author illustrates this theme with the help of a thorough textual analysis regarding people in the first part of Saxo—i.e., the mythical books. The author compares this to the Danish conquest of Latvia and Estonia during Saxo's own age—starting, however, from the mythical past described by Saxo. In this way the author shows that his analysis of the counsellors constitutes an important contribution to the ongoing discussion on Saxo's way of composing the *Gesta Danorum*.

Bertil Nilsson
Professor Emeritus of the History of Christianity, Lund, Sweden
January 22, 2017

PREFACE

A LOT HAS been written about the *Gesta Danorum*, both in Scandinavia and abroad. This lengthy and most important Danish medieval source provided a great deal of inspiration—and criticism alike—to the following authors and scholars. Some preliminary words are, therefore, necessary to justify the production of one more work about it.

This book is based in great part on our Master's dissertation, argued in Curitiba, Brazil, in the beginning of 2008. It began as a restricted study of excerpts in Saxo Grammaticus with connection to the East—most specifically the Eastern Baltic—but assumed greater proportions with time. At the time, studies concerning Scandinavia and Germanic populations in the Middle Ages were a novelty in Brazil and Latin America, a circumstance that, although improved, still remains a setback. Medieval scholarship in Brazil, firmly grounded in its French founders and owing a great deal to the *Annales* School, was still disconnected from Scandinavian and Germanic studies.

Besides this novelty, personal motivations were of equal importance when choosing our subject and Saxo seemed to be a suitable choice, not to mention that just after the decades of 1990s and 2000s the Baltic area started to be studied more seriously in connection with the *Gesta Danorum*.

Since then there has been in Brazil and in Latin America generally a visible evolution in quantity and quality in the production of monographs and studies about Northern Europe, and also the creation of important groups for research, such as the LEM (Leituras em Escandinávia Medieval—"Readings in Medieval Scandinavia") and the NEVE (Núcleo de Estudos Vikings e Escandinavos—"Centre for Scandinavian and Viking Studies"); also the last decades witnessed an exponential growth in international production by scholars from Brazil and Latin America as well as a increased engagement in international events.

Still there is, of course, space and need for more production and dialogue with international scholars and centres, and isolation remains a concern not only regarding international production, but also among peers, most of all the established scholars. There are still very few chairs and tenures occupied by specialists in Scandinavia, accompanied by a great interest in the thematic from undergraduates. This condition worsens sensibly as we turn our interest eastward, encompassing Baltic, Finno-Ugric and Slavic populations, the medieval studies of which in Brazil and Latin America are almost nonexistent.

Writing this book was a dual challenge, therefore; at first place, there was the urge to overcome regional restrictions such as access to bibliography, languages, material, and communication with exchange scholarship. On the other side, there

was the need to present a work significant by its own merit. It is for the reader to judge how closely these goals were achieved.

The *Gesta Danorum* has been studied in different ways since its first editions; many Danish scholars have seen it as their primal, National History. In this way, the work acquired the status of “national monument.” More recently not only the Danes, but also Scandinavian, German, and Anglo-Saxon scholars, developed other approaches to it, interested in what the *Gesta* would provide from an ancient, pagan, truly “Germanic” lore, in great part emphasizing the first books (I–IX), categorized as “mythical” in contraposition to the last books (X–XVI), considered “historical.” These two approaches, mixed with German historicism, developed a marked tradition of disregarding Saxo Grammaticus as a reliable testimony about the Northern lore in comparison with other Scandinavian authors such as Snorri Sturlusson. Saxo might be thought reasonably interesting when narrating some events of the conquest of the Slavic lands and the age of Valdemar, but of no use when conveying Scandinavian myths. Of course this is an over-simplification; between these extreme approaches many works have been produced grounded in solid research and scholarship, dealing with the most varied topics, from political to cultural history.

Since the 1980s, but particularly the 1990s, a revitalization occurred in studies of Saxo, inserting new thematics, questions, and concerns. The complex relationship of the *Gesta Danorum* with Western medieval scholarship was scrutinized, along with solid advances in the perception of how intricate were Saxo’s re-elaborations and uses of the classics. Overcoming of historicism and paradigms alike also contributed to well-balanced analysis of the *Gesta Danorum*, demonstrating that many times the reconstruction of a myth says more to the historian than an actual account of some “fact.”

The Eastern Baltic area provided a species of “final frontier” on Saxo studies, remaining a field largely unexplored. This circumstance is, to say the least, curious, since Saxo is one of the few medieval authors to quote several of the peoples and nations from the Baltic and as such was recognized by few authors from the Baltic States and Germany, since the question faces the aforementioned problems of historicity and plausibility: To what degree do Saxo’s narratives—not only those concerning the Eastern peoples—reflect actual events, to even some minor degree of the reality?

Some central goals to this research, thus, are to provide some crossover between Scandinavian studies and general medieval scholarship, including the Eastern Baltic sphere and transposing the tyranny of the “fact.” Certainly, all historical study ought to be strongly concerned with dates, contexts and settings; the actual “fact,” however, is always constructed, and as such must be regarded and studied. Therefore, there is less importance in whether the myth of Balder in

Saxo's narrative approximates to some supposed "original" than in the ideology reflected in the manner by which the author models his version of the myth; to the attentive historian, a half-truth is as eloquent—or more so—than a supposed whole truth.

As said before, the preliminary steps in this research focused on the analysis of excerpts containing references to the Baltic peoples, above all trying to grasp Saxo's—and Danish—perceptions about the East, and the manner in which Danish external affairs should be conducted in the Eastern Baltic according to these perceptions. As the work progressed, some patterns emerged and the need to put some order to the great number of veiled references, dubious assertions, and eloquent elaborations from Saxo Grammaticus became clear.

Two conceptions, schemes or structures provided a theoretical frame to this corpus: the first, the Four Cardinal Virtues scheme, was first studied in the *Gesta Danorum* by Kurt Johannesson in 1978; the second one is a conception of our own proposition, which we named "Thematic of the Counsellor." By this we understood Saxo's version of widespread medieval elaborations of authority as found in the "mirror-for-princes," in which the kings perform better their role as rulers when adequately counselled by wise men, usually clergymen.

The systematic analysis of these schemes provided a strong basis to assert the defence of hierocratic conceptions in the *Gesta Danorum* even in the books where no mention was made of the Church or Christianity at all, alongside the well-explored defence of Danish hegemony. The Eastern references, therefore, were diluted in a larger conception that, in last instance, should be completely explained as the whole Baltic area is included in the analysis—including its easternmost portions. This agenda would be summarized as the Danish hegemony over Northern Europe accomplished by the king under archepiscopal guidance; the materialization of this project was accomplished in the Northern Crusades. For the Danes to successfully achieve this goal, however, a long way had to be followed, beginning with the education of the king through a virtuous path and a rightful and wise guidance, provided by the churchmen.

Therefore, this work is organized in a relatively traditional way; in the first and second chapters we will present some contextual and referential information about Denmark, highlighting its relationship with the Baltic area, as well as summarizing some fundamental information concerning Saxo, his origins and work.

In the third chapter, we discuss briefly some medieval political conception and, most of all, we analyse the way by which authors tried to find it in *Gesta Danorum*, preparing the way for our own further arguments regarding Saxo's preference for hierocracy; in the fourth chapter, we present some reflections on the ways Saxo deals with historical methodology, particularly when providing euhemeristic interpretations to his own workmanship.

In the two final chapters we will discuss the aforementioned schemes in Saxo's work: in the fifth, the Cardinal Virtues elaboration, departing from Johannesson's inspiration but trying to analyse the primary source direct and independently; and at last, in the sixth chapter, we proceed to defend in detail our own proposition of the "Thematic of the Counsellor," as a literary motif or device used by Saxo in order to propose his own politics and moral conceptions and the way he believed Denmark ought to be ruled.

Regarding methodology, this should be clear to the reader from the prominence given to the primary source; Saxo will be quoted quite often. In Saxo's excerpts Olrik's edition provided the base notation; translations of the English reader were provided in all cases. Regarding the translation of the documents, our general preference when dealing with books I–IX was given to Peter Fisher's translation, first published in 1979 and reprinted several times. Some exceptions to this rule will be used in a few poems, for which we went back to the old fashioned and reliable version of Elton, whose flowery language many times fitted better in a bilingual display of Saxo's *carminae*.

Preference was given to books I–IX due to many factors, but above all because of the abundance of references both to eastern regions and to the virtues, and the possibility of detecting the aforementioned patterns and schemes in it. Also these books had been heavily scrutinized with other intentions in mind; the defence of hierocratic conceptions in it may seem impossible, given the absence of the Church in Denmark. We intend to show quite the contrary.

When dealing with the last books, preference was given to Christiansen's texts from the 1980s. As a matter of fact, at the time of the end of this book's process of writing Fisher's complete translation including the last books had just came out. These translators used different criteria for the spelling of names. Therefore, we used our own parameters, described below, for sake of uniformity and in order to facilitate the reading. The complete list of editions and translations of the *Gesta Danorum* can be consulted at the end of this book.

We maintained personal names in their Latin original, including nominative endings and avoiding anglicizing or presenting equivalent Scandinavian names; thus, we used Hadingus instead of Hadhing or Haðing, Othinus instead of Odin or Óðinn, and so on. Exceptions are the names of kings and other historical *personae* largely used in the bibliography, such as Knut and Valdemar instead of "Canutus" and "Valdemarus," as well as names of popes. Places and toponyms were translated in the most part to the original languages; in cases where the native name was less known than that used by conquerors and foreigners, a double name was given, as in the case of the river Daugava in Latvia, Düna in German and Dvina in Russian.

Rendering of Baltic names presented some trouble since there is no consensus among the publications available in English; for Latvian *Kurši*, for example, one can

find “Couronians,” “Curonians,” “Kurlanders,” “Kurs”; even Saxo and other Latin sources presented variable spelling, even using different declensions for the same nouns. The general principle guiding our terminology was to maintain the maximum possible closeness to the primary sources and to the native names without impairing readability and without incurring any anacronism. Some modern native names differ totally from the medieval designations, such as Tallinn to Reval or Haapsalu to Rotala; in such cases, the double name is presented in the text, with the preference given to the medieval names. In order to make clear the terminology to the reader two comparison charts are provided containing the German and native names of the cities, the place and people names used in the text, as well as the most common variants in primary sources and general bibliography (see Tables 0.1 and 0.2). All the maps and tables were made by the author.

Table 0.1: Equivalent City Names in Estonia and Livonia
(Est. = Estonian, Lat. = Latvian, Liv. = Livonian)

German name	Native name
Dorpat	Tartu (Est.)
Dünhof	Daugmale (Lat.)
Fellin	Viljandi (Est.)
Holm	Mārtiņsala (Lat.)
Jerwen	Järvamaa (Est.); Jerwia (Lat.)
Kokenhusen	Koknese (Lat.)
Leal	Lihula (Est.)
Ludsen	Ludza (Lat.)
Marienhausen	Viļaka (Lat.)
Odenpäh	Otepää (Est.)
Pernau	Pärnu (Est.)
Reval	Tallinn (Est.)
Ronneburg	Rauna (Est.)
Rotala	Haapsalu (Est.)
Treiden, Thoreyda	Turaida (Liv.)
Üxküll	Ikšķilā (Liv.), Ikšķile (Lat.)
Warbola	Varbola (Est.)
Wenden	Cēsis (Lat.)
Wolmar	Valmiera (Lat.)

Table 0.2: Spellings and Equivalence of Names

Name used in the book	Variant spellings in Norse and Latin sources
Dagö	
Daugava	Düna, Dvina
Estonia	Estia, Hestia, Eistland
Finland, Finns	Finnia; Finni
Finnmark	Finnmarchia, Finni, Lappia (Saxo)
Kiev	Cønogardia, Kønugard
Kurland (place); kurs (people)	Kúrland, Curetia (place); chori, curetes, kurir (people)
Livonians	Livi, livones
Novgorod,	Holmgard, Holmgardia
Ösel	Isisla, Islu
Polotsk	Paltisca, Palteiskja
Russia	Ruscia
Sambia	Sambia, Sembia
Slavia, (Western) Slavs	S(c)lavia, Venethia, Vindland (place); sclaveni, vindr (people)
Tavastia	Tavastia, Tavastehus
Zemgale (place); Zemgalians (people)	Semgalla/ Semigallia, Semgalia (place); Semgalli, Semgallir (people)

Variant spellings in bibliography	Comments
Hiiumaa	Island off western Estonia
Düna, Vaina, Dvina, Western Dvina	
Eesti, Estland (place); Esths (people)	Estonia and its people, comprising different tribal groups.
Suomi, Finns	Finland proper, composed of several areas such as Tavastia (Yam). See "Finmark"
Finnmark, Lapland	Northern area of Scandinavia, inhabited by the Sámi (Laps). It should not be confused with Finland, although "Finns," "finnar" or some variant would be used of the Sámi, but also to other Finno-Ugric peoples in Scandinavian sources
Kurzeme, C(o)urland, C(o)uronia (place); kurši, kurlanders, C(o)uronians (people)	Western province of contemporary Latvia, a duchy in modern times.
Livians, libieši	
Saaremaa	Large island off western Estonia
Russia, Ruthenia, Rus', Rus; Russians, ruthenians	
Prussians, Sembia/sembians, Samland/samlanders	Usually named as Old Prussians, the Baltic people assimilated by the Germans after the Middle Ages
Slavs, Western Slavs, Wends	Western Slavic area, encompassed many peoples such as the Wends, Rugii, Sorabians, Wilzi
	Southern area of Finland
Semgal(l)ia/ Semigal(l)ians Semgals, Zemgals/ Zemgalians	Central region of Latvia



Map 0.1: The World of the *Gesta Danorum*